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EAST-EUROPEAN PROBLEMS

N° 7.

The Martyrdom of Croatia

By

C. BATTORICH

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The Martyrdom of Croatia.

By C. Battorich.

Up to the present the Serbs have succeeded in hushing up the fact before the great Western Powers that, owing to the decision of the Entente who made themselves the advocate of the smaller nations' rights, quite a number of these nations in the Balkans and the adjoining territories have been delivered to the ruthless incapacity of Serbian imperialism, deprived of their fundamental rights, and filled with exasperation in consequence. The Bulgarians, Hungarians, Croats and Slovenes, Albanians and Montenegrians have been made the object of inhuman sufferings and oppression, and the still outstanding peace threatens them with complete ruin.

The now broken up Habsburg Monarchy and ill-fated Hungary had managed Croatia's affairs for decades in such a manner that the Croatian nation in autumn 1918, confiding in the wisdom of the great Western Powers, put up with the then state of affairs, though not without regret at the detachment from the fellow-sufferer in many years' struggles and alarm at the attitude of its Balkan neighbour. Yet individual opinion remained silent and the whole of the nation followed those that had taken the lead in this critical hour. Disappointed in its old friends, it forgot the bitterness of thirteen centuries and with brotherly sentiments turned towards the Serbs, in anticipation of but the best and noblest

treatment from that people, the worthy ally of the great French, Italian and English nations.

The entering Serbian army very quickly enlightened the Croats as to their error; they had thrown open the doors of hitherto unvanquished Zagrab not to a well-disposed friend, but to the harsh conquerer of the Balkans. While the members of the National Council, who thought themselves in possession of supreme power, held conferences and took counsel as to the measures to be adopted, the Serbian sheriff installed himself in his office and let everybody know, in a Balkan fashion, that it was his authority people had to reckon with.

The history of the 38 days in which the territory of the former Monarchy was reshaped reads like a fascinating story. Yougoslavia came into being at Zagrab, on paper at least, as an independent state. Proud Zagrab, the capital of a small country restricted in its national life hitherto, at once became the centre of a 7—8 million state, furnished with all the attributes of a worthy representative of the nation's life. True, that state of things was but a temporary one; yet appearances bespoke of all conditions for the future evolution being dependent on the Croation nation which was to take the lead in the new state to be organised, since the country under Zagrab's imperium was the foremost as to size, numbers of inhabitants, economic conditions and progress in civilisation.

At the beginning of November, Korosec, the President of the National Council, entered an agreement with the Serbian Premier Pašić, in which he stipulated that until the formation of the Constituent Assembly the National Council would exercise supreme power in Yougoslavia, and that it were the Constituent's task to decide on the form of government. With this Convenant signed on 9th November at Génève the culminating point of the 33

days state's history was attained; what follows is the story of its decline. In the middle of November Pašić rendered invalid the agreement and the beginning of December found the Serbian Regent Alexander proclaiming the constitution of the *kingdom SHS.* Thus the sovereignty promised in conjunction with provincial autonomy was rendered a scrap of paper.

November was the month of disillusion for the Croats. The mean behaviour of the entering Serbian troops, bearing the banner of the Karagyorgyevics, soon succeeded in alienating the whole of the population and engendered a keen republican movement among the Croatian nation hitherto quite averse to republican sentiments. The exclusively Croatian parties in particular assumed a decidedly republican attitude: the peasants' party, the legality party, the Starcević and progressive parties. Discusted with the deeds of the Serbian royal army, they thought the interests of the Croatian nation better safeguarded by a Yougoslav Republic. As a matter of course, the Serbs were ill pleased with this republican movement and soon arrested its leader Stephen Radić and some of his followers, prohibiting all newspapers of republican tendencies. The Starcević and progressive parties, in response to the manifesto issued in December, ceased their republican agitation, while the peasants' and legality parties are to this day the object of violent persecution.

At Christmas a common cabinet came into being, after long and often seemingly fruitless negotiations, in which the Croatian parties with the exception of those considered illoyal found due representation. Svetozar Pribicević, the Croatian Serb notorious for his hate of the Croats, became Minister for Home Affairs and hastened to inaugurate an outspoken anti-Croatian policy on the whole line. Even the

unabashed Mihalovich, renowned for the unprecedented corruption of his régime and his servility to public opinion, did not appear sufficiently trustworthy to him, for which reason he made him retire and appointed Polaćek of Czech-Serbian descendance Bánus for Croatia. This appointment was a flagrant breach of the December agreement since it had happened without consulting the Croatian Diet. Pribicević interdicted the further sittings of the Diet and thus neither Polaćek nor his successor Tomljenovic could make his appearance before this body, as customary in compliance with the tradition of many centuries. With this act the Croatian autonomy had *de facto* ceased to exist. The Hungarians had not ventured on such a course of action even at the time of the most embittered struggles. Polaćek as well as Tomljenović were regarded as plain officials by the Home Minister. They were deprived of every attribute indicative of the Banus' political significance. Under Hungary's rule, the Banus had been the third of the country's standard-bearers, inferior in rank but to the Archbishop and Governor. In Hungary the Banus was dependent on the Premier only, the result of the "liberation" to-day is displayed in the highest Croatian civil office having lost all significance and the Banus being exposed to dismissal at the Home Minister's pleasure.

In March 1919 the common government assembled the common Parliament at Belgrade. But we must not imagine this Parliament to have been formed on the basis of general elections. The Serbian Scupstina selected the members of the Parliament from its own ranks or simply appointed them like in Macedonia and Montenegro; in other parts of the country they were nominated by the political groups or parties according to a certain scheme they had agreed on. Needless to state that neither

the legality party, nor the peasants or the Magyarphile unionists obtained any seats.

Yougoslavia is an artificial creation to such a degree that even this assembly which came into being in compliance with the government's wishes did not prove capable of work. The Parliament, during its half year's existence, did not read a single bill. The racial, cultural and religious antagonism occasionally caused outbursts of such violence that an *ad hoc* majority was unattainable. One crisis followed the other and gradually every Croatian and Slovene party fell off, and so did the founders of Serbia's greatness, the radicals. The minority party, the so-called democrats, whose leader was Pribicević, remained in power. This party is governing for about half a year now, without any parliamentary control, and endeavours to suppress the excitement spreading throughout the country by means of corruption and party-terror.

It is easy enough to imagine what was Croatia's fate under Mr. Pribicević' absolutism. Zagrab soon sank to the rank of a mere provincial town. The mother-country's union with the neighbouring Croatian lands (Bosnia, Dalmatia), on the way of realisation under the Habsburgs' hegemony and warranted by a Hungarian Law, was defeated and the integrity of old Croatia's territory threatened. The county of Szerém, one of Croatia's most fertile districts, was treated as integral part of Serbia. To economically subdue the Croatian nation, the crown was artificially depreciated, fell below the worth of a dinar, and finally was declared to represent a quarter of a dinar in spite of its intrinsic value being the same. Under the title of land-reform they robbed the middle-sized estates from the landowners who had always most devoutly promoted the national idea. With the introduction of a governmental antidenominational system they offended the Catholi-

cism inherent in the Croatian race. To deprive it of one of its main sources of strength which Catholicism had always afforded it and to which it was bound by a thousand memories of its past, the Serbs started a movement aiming at the unification of the Catholic and Orthodox Church with the aid of the state's subsidies. The sons of the Croatian nation in the officials' staff were supplanted by Serbs, the Croatian recruits were dragged to Albania and Macedonia and Croatia invaded by semi-savages from the remotest parts of the Balkans. With their aid a régime of terror was established. Who dared resist, was thrown into dungeon. Even the leaders of the movement for improving the payment of the Croatian officials' staff were detained. They are still imprisoned and unable to obtain adequate defence. Radić, the peasant leader, has suffered confinement for nine months already, having been tried now only; on the other hand the Bolshevist agitators are at liberty to follow their vocation.

It is the obvions aim of Pribicević to materially and morally reduce the Croatian nation to such an extent as to render it an easy prey to Serbian appetites. It had already suffered oppression on the hands of Austrian emperors, had been hampered in its evolution by the Magyars; but neither had made its national annihilation their overt object; that was reserved to its present "liberators".

We cannot forbear asking in how far do these facts agree with the noble principles proclaimed by the Entente Powers? Will the great Western nations not stop to consider that in default of the realisation of their avowed principles, the countries of the former Monarchy and the Balkans will have to look another way for the guidance they absolutely depend on in their present state of upheaval?

We Croats address our plea to all Europe in the name of the peoples suffering oppression: do not deliver us to the Moloch of Serbian imperialism. The thirteen centuries that we have spent uninterruptedly in the defence of Western civilisation against the encroachments of Byzantium and Asia justify us in calling attention to the tragic fate of our nation. We do not ask for any particular favour, but for justice. Let the Entente order the plebiscite to take place, in the absence of Serbian troops, and every Croat will accept the result. The self-determination of the peoples remains an empty phrase if they are not consulted as to their fate; yet we have never been questioned on this all-important issue.

Let Europe know that neither we nor the Hungarians and Bulgarians, nor the other nations under oppression will ever content themselves with this their lot. If Europe will not afford them justice, they are determined either to achieve the recognition of their rights or to perish to the last man. Whether this our struggle for freedom will not inflame all Europe again, whether the new world to arise will not bereave the Entente Powers of their conquest's harvest, we leave to the insight of Western public opinion to ponder on.

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